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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000672

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/03/2015

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: "CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS FIRST" DEMONSTRATION
HIGHLIGHTS OPPOSITION'S DISCONTENT

REF: A. MANAMA 501

[¶](#)B. MANAMA 471

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[¶](#)11. (C) Four opposition political societies, represented by the constitutional conference general secretariat, organized a May 6 demonstration with the theme "Constitutional Reforms First." The estimated 5,000-10,000 participants were peaceful, and police kept a low profile. Opposition leaders have expressed publicly and privately that they are using demonstrations to increase pressure on the GOB in hopes of gaining concessions on constitutional or elections reform. The societies represented by the general secretariat boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections and have vowed to boycott the 2006 elections unless they are granted a dialogue with the King or his representative on amending the constitution. End Summary.

"Constitutional Reforms First"

[¶](#)12. (SBU) An alliance of four opposition political societies, represented by the constitutional conference general secretariat, organized a May 6 demonstration calling for

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constitutional reforms. An estimated 5,000-10,000 people attended the rally. Before launching the event, organizers gave strict instructions to participants to cooperate fully with police and refrain from using any signs or slogans that did not represent either Bahrain or the rally's theme, "Constitutional Reforms First." Participants were peaceful and speakers did not engage in aggressive or hostile rhetoric. Patriotic songs played in the background and Bahraini flags were handed out. Traffic officials and police kept a low profile.

[¶](#)13. (SBU) The event is a follow-on to the March 25 rally organized by leading Shi'a opposition society Al Wifaq (Refs A and B). The societies represented by the general secretariat -- Al Wifaq, Al Amal Al Islami, National

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Democratic Action Society, and Al Tajamo' Al Qowmi -- boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections and have vowed to boycott the 2006 elections unless they are granted a dialogue with the King or his representative on amending the constitution.

Minister of Social Affairs: Demonstrations are Ineffective

[¶](#)14. (SBU) Despite earlier indications to the contrary, the press announced that Ministry of Interior officials gave the organizers permission to hold the demonstration and pledged to provide support in regulating traffic. Following the rally, Minister of Social Affairs Dr. Fatima Al Belooshi told the press that demonstrations are an ineffective way of addressing constitutional reform. She noted that only parliament can change the constitution and encouraged the opposition to participate in the electoral process.

[¶](#)15. (SBU) Al Wifaq President Sheikh Ali Salman responded publicly May 7 saying that if parliamentarians really had the power to make constitutional changes, they would have done so in the past three years. The head of the general secretariat, Jalila Al Sayed, told journalists that

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oppositionists had no choice but to hold demonstrations as the GOB refuses to engage in dialogue with them. Prominent Sunni cleric Sheikh Salah Al Jowder, who is also a municipal councilman in a Sunni-concentrated area, attended the rally and said that all political groups in Bahrain want constitutional reform.

Looking for a Royal Concession

16. (C) Al Wifaq board member Nizar Al Qari told PolOff that the four opposition societies had already decided that they would participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections. However, they need a face saving concession from the King in order to announce their decision publicly. (Comment: This is so they can justify having boycotted the political system since 2002. End comment.) In holding a series of demonstrations, the opposition seeks to increase tension so that the King will be forced to intervene and engage seriously with the opposition.

17. (C) Mansour Al Jamry (protect), editor-in-chief of independent daily newspaper Al Wasat, told the Ambassador at a lunch in honor of visiting Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass, that leading Shi'a cleric Sheikh Issa Qassem had sent a message through Al Jamry offering to meet with the King to discuss the constitutional issue, but the King had not responded. Al Jamry said that, in his view, all the Shi'a political demands are negotiable; they just want the opportunity to discuss the issues with the King. The types of concessions they are looking for include the redistricting of electoral boundaries, a decrease in the appointed Shura Council's authority, and constitutional amendments. (Note: The MEPI-funded National Democratic Institute has held several conferences and seminars recently on these issues. End Note.)

Comment

18. (C) The opposition is organizing demonstrations to pressure the GOB so it can create a face-saving way of getting into the political game. Working outside of the system, there is little that it can provide in terms of housing, jobs, and other issues of concern to Bahrainis. Several of the prominent oppositionists are realizing this, and some are privately expressing interest in getting into the parliament, even if the legislature is not as strong as they would like it to be. The GOB's decision to allow the May 6 demonstration may point to the government's recognition that actions perceived as restricting freedoms backfire and bring additional pressure onto the government. Given that parliamentary elections are still 18 months away, there is still plenty of time to resolve these matters. But pressure is building, even among the more mainstream oppositionists, for a resolution to come sooner rather than later.

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